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SUBJECT: DEFORESTATION IN VENEZUELA: MISSION TREE OR
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

REF: 2006 CARACAS 01791

Classified By: Economic Counselor Andrew N. Bowen for Reason 1.4 (D)

11. (SBU) Summary: Despite Chavez' pro-environment rhetoric and support for replanting thousands of trees through his Mission Tree ("Mision Arbol"), deforestation rates have not abated. Lack of transparency and enforcement of environmental laws have undermined BRV progress, and Venezuela now finds itself on the top ten list of countries with the largest net forest loss per year. Politicization of the BRV's technical institutions, Chavez' desire to resettle Venezuela's interior, and his willingness to launch an environmentally destructive mega-gas pipeline indicate a greater appreciation for the value of conservation propaganda than implementing sustainable environmental policies. While reforestation projects are a step forward, much of Chavez' pro-environment rhetoric remains words on paper that have yet to achieve tangible results. End Summary.

Venezuela's Forests

12. (U) With approximately 47.7 million hectares (118 million acres) of forested land, Venezuelan territory is nearly half covered by forests. These forests stand out globally for their biodiversity; Venezuela ranks among the top twenty countries in the world for the number of indigenous plants, mammals, amphibians, birds, and reptiles. In the last forty years, roughly 80 percent of Venezuela's estimated deforestation has occurred north of the Orinoco River, where most of the major population centers are located. Approximately 80 percent of the remaining Venezuelan forests are located south of the Orinoco River in the sparsely populated Guayana region, which includes the Delta Amacuro, Bolivar, and Amazonas states. Illegal mining and timber operations, along with mining runoff and small agriculture land invasions threaten these forests.

Deforestation Numbers Tell a Different Story

13. (SBU) Many of Chavez' supporters promote the image of Chavez as Venezuela's "first green president," vehemently blaming previous Venezuelan governments for deforestation and environmental destruction. During his frequent public addresses, Chavez often rails against the United States and multinationals for anti-environment policies, while talking expansively about his pro-environment vision. Americo Catalan, director of Forest Investigation and Projects at the

Ministry of the Peoples Power for Environment and Resources (MPPARN), said in a 2006 interview that he believed that deforestation rates in Venezuela have diminished under Chavez. However, the numbers tell a different story.

¶4. (SBU) Between 1982 and 1995, Venezuela suffered an average annual deforestation rate of over 260,000 hectares (642,473 acres) according to the international conservation NGO, Global Forest Watch (GFW). Despite BRV claims that the situation is improving, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), from 2000 to 2005 Venezuela lost 287,600 hectares (710,675 acres) per year, an 11 percent increase in the number of hectares lost. In fact, from 2000-2005 Venezuela joined the ten countries with the largest net forest loss per year, a list that included: Brazil, Indonesia, Sudan, Burma, Zambia, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zimbabwe.

Mission Tree or Mission Impossible?

¶5. (C) To the BRV's credit, Chavez' response to being placed on the top 10 deforestation list was to initiate Mission Tree ("Mision Arbol"). Begun in May 2006, Mission Tree is a grassroots reforestation program with a USD 23 million budget and a five-year goal of replanting 370,000 acres of forest. As part of this program, the BRV paid peasant farmers and school children minimum wage (approximately USD 14 per day) to organize Conservation Committees that design and implement reforestation projects on their lands. Daniela Vizcaino, the coordinator of Conservation International in the Guayana region, told Econoff that she has been impressed with how Mission Tree actually gave subsidies to illegal miners, providing them with an alternative form of income. A

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proposed Forest Law also would make stopping the loss of native forests an environmental priority and incorporate the Conservation Committees into the Communal Councils. (Note: Communal Councils refer to grassroots community organizations that the BRV is pushing to the political forefront. End Note.)

¶6. (C) Alejandro Luy from the Venezuelan sustainable development NGO, Tierra Viva, told Econoff during an August meeting that although many of the BRV's environmental programs are well intentioned, they are often poorly executed. He specifically cited Mission Tree as an example of this. While Luy agreed with the goals of this mission, the results on the ground were far more meager than the government's propaganda, noting that the participants lacked the technical capacity and methodology to implement this type of program. Environmental groups have also noted that Venezuela typically loses twice the amount of forest per year than the mission plans on replanting.

Forest Reserves without Forests

¶7. (SBU) The BRV has argued that deforestation had been reduced in Venezuela thanks to Chavez' expansion of the Areas Under Regulation of the Special Administration (ABRAE) system, a program initially formed in 1983 to protect and conserve land and resources in national parks and reserves. The BRV has claimed that over 46 percent of the total Venezuelan territory is protected under the ABRAE system and almost a third of Venezuela's forest. This, if true, would make it one of the largest extensions of "protected" land in Latin America.

¶8. (C) Although these numbers should be encouraging, only 15 percent of these protected areas actually have "rules for appropriate use." Even one of the columnists from the Pro-Chavez propaganda website Venezuelaanalysis.com wrote,

"with the lack of regulation, inherent corruption and, the rules left open to interpretation, it appears that many of the ABRAE designations are protected only on paper, and it is easy to see how in Venezuela, there can exist a forest reserve without a forest." In its 2002 "State of Venezuela's Forests" report, GFW said that Venezuela has succeeded in establishing a complex protected area system, but warned that the overlapping types of protected areas, the uncertainty regarding protected area boundaries, and the lack of systematic on-the-ground management undermined the country's forest conservation efforts. Vizcaino also told Econoff that despite having been impressed by some of the MPPARN's recent "rules for appropriate use" proposals, she had yet to observe any implementation of these plans.

BRV Forest Policies in Action

¶9. (SBU) A glaring example of Bolivarian hypocrisy is its treatment of the Imataca Forest Reserve. Located in the Guayana region, the Imataca Forest Reserve is a 3.6 million hectare (9 million acres) reserve home to no less than 5 different indigenous peoples. It also potentially holds one of the largest gold reserves (estimated at 21 million ounces) in Latin America and timber valued at USD 6 billion. In 1997, Venezuela's former President Rafael Caldera signed decree 1,850 designating roughly 40 percent of the total surface for logging and mining. This decree was roundly condemned by environmental groups and politicians including candidate Chavez who argued, "if we have to cut the forest in order to get to the gold, then I will stay with the forest." Due to the popular backlash, decree 1,850 was not implemented and the Supreme Court nullified the decree. Despite earlier promises, in 2004 Chavez signed decree 3,110 which designated 12 percent of the surface of the Imataca Forest Reserve for mixed logging and mining use, and another 60 percent for wood logging. In total, this decree zoned 72 percent or 2.7 million hectares of this massive reserve for mining and logging use.

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Trying to Save the Forests without Maps or Data

¶10. (SBU) A major obstacle preventing successful conservation in Venezuela is the lack of government transparency and reliable data. While northern Venezuela has been relatively

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well surveyed, much of the Guayana region lacks even basic cartography such as detailed topographic maps and an accurate hydrology map. Important information on forest cover, the status of mining concessions, compliance with environmental permitting, and sanctions against both mining and logging concessions are either not available or considered confidential. According to GFW, this lack of data and

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transparency is especially problematic because it precludes sound planning and informed decision making. Even GFW Venezuela's requests for basic cartographic data (such as the official territorial boundary) to conduct an elaborate independent study of Venezuela's forests have not been answered to date.

The Great Gas Pipeline of the South

¶11. (SBU) One of Chavez' pet projects that would have dramatic environmental consequences if implemented would be the Gas Pipeline of the South (Reftel A). This USD 20 billion project would stretch some 5,000 miles of pipeline from the Orinoco in Northeast Venezuela south through Bolivar state into Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Along the way

this pipeline would go through Canaima national park, the Amazon, and numerous other protected forested areas. Chavez has said that this project is not motivated by economic reasons, explaining that he would sell gas to the U.S. if he were interested in profiting. A Venezuelan environmental group, Friends of the Great Savannah, has stated that this project would be "the definitive step for the destruction of the Amazon, the Venezuela Guayana, and diverse ecosystems of the Caribbean and Atlantic Coastline." However, as even Chavez has admitted, the pipeline plan appears to have been halted due to rumored opposition from Brazil.

Unopposed Land Invasions

¶12. (SBU) Land invasions in national parks have become an increasingly easy to observe problem in Venezuela. The BRV has shown little interest or political will for evicting squatters, whom it views as its natural supporters. In fact, Chavez has stated publicly his desire to move people from the over-crowded cities back to the interior of the country, a policy GFW has noted would rapidly increase the pace of deforestation.

Politicizing Technical Institutions

¶13. (C) Our NGO contacts unanimously agree that it has become increasingly difficult to work with the BRV. The consensus among NGO contacts is that while it is still possible to cooperate with agencies such as the National Park Institute (INPARQUES), an autonomous institute that has administrative control over federally protected land, it has become more difficult as it has become increasingly politicized. Post has observed and experienced this as well. In 2006, the then director of INPARQUES, Renzo Silva had agreed to a cooperation project with Post where we would provide INPARQUES with technical on-the-ground forest fire training for a 2-3 week period. When Econoff followed up with INPARQUES in February 2007, it became apparent that the whole INPARQUES team had been changed, and the new director showed no interest in cooperating with the USG. Rather than developing new methods for enforcing Venezuelan laws, INPARQUES' current efforts have been focused on developing a convoluted proposal on its transformation from a national park institute to a socialist institution.

Comment

¶14. (C) Although many of Chavez' supporters argue that his progressive environmental policies and rhetoric are big improvements over the past, it is difficult to reconcile the BRV's unwillingness to displace squatters, conduct necessary surveys, or enforce its current regulations with conservation. Even though the BRV has some well-intentioned policies and projects, it has yet to efficiently implement them. Despite some progress, much of Chavez' pro-environmental rhetoric remains just that, and has yet to achieve tangible results.

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